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Leadership Personality Research

by

MAJ W.J. GRACO

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### Abstract

This paper discusses three issues relevant to leadership personality research. The first compares interindividual to intraindividual research strategies. The former explains differences between individuals such as leaders and nonleaders and the latter explains differences within leaders. It is suggested that intra-individual strategies are better than interindividual strategies for demonstrating the role personality characteristics play in leadership. The second discusses situationally determined leadership measurements. It is recommended that researchers should use leadership measurements which are related to work behaviour rather than use general personality trait measurements. The third reviews the relationship between personality variables and leadership behaviours. It is pointed out that leadership research has concentrated on identifying the personality characteristics of leaders and the behaviours they use but few attempts have been made to link the two sets of variables.

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The findings and views expressed in this Research Note are the result of the author's research studies and are not to be taken as the official opinion or policy of the Department of Defence (Army Office).

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Leadership personality research has had a chequered career. Before World War Two it enjoyed popularity when researchers searched for a set of traits which would identify individuals who would become good leaders. After the War interest in this area waned when it became apparent that research had failed to demonstrate unique leadership qualities that are invariant from situation to situation.

It was found that certain traits, such as intelligence, showed consistent but small relationships with leadership.

When it appeared that this area would not produce significant results, many researchers shifted attention to leadership behaviours in the 1950s and ultimately to the interaction between the leader's personality, his behaviours and his situation in the 1960s and 1970s. These interactive approaches were called contingency theories.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss leadership personality research and to demonstrate, that contrary to the opinion of some theorists (eg see Chemers and Rice, 1974, P 92-93) this field is still a profitable area to investigate.

In a previous paper (Graco, 1978) which reviewed research on personality characteristics of leaders, the following observations were made based on an examination of Stogdill's findings on leadership trait research (1948; 1974, ch 6)

- a. Persons possessing certain traits have greater potential to be leaders
- b. The ways in which the leader interacts with others in a social situation basically resolves whether his leadership potential will be realised.
- c. That the basic shortcoming of earlier leadership trait research may have been that it has failed to take into account the moderating effects of situational variables in leadership performance and maintenance of role. If the effects of situational variables were controlled, or were taken into account comparatively more conclusive results may be obtained concerning the role of personality variables in the leadership equation.
- d. That earlier leadership trait research has concentrated almost exclusively on the traits leaders should possess rather than those they should not possess.

In the same paper the author also reviewed some recent developments in leadership personality research. Areas examined included motivation, values and cognitive styles of leaders as well as some personality characteristics purported to be associated with military incompetence.

#### Aims

In this paper three additional leadership personality issues are discussed. These deal with:

- a. The use of intraindividual research strategies
- b. The use of situationally determined measurements
- c. The relationships between personality variables and leadership behaviours.

The paper explains these approaches and makes a number of recommendations. The views presented represent an extension of the ideas developed in the previous paper (Graco, 1978).

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*This note is a summary of a paper presented at a meeting of TTCP Sub-Group U (Behavioural Sciences) held at Sydney 16-20 Nov 81*

## RESEARCH STRATEGIES

Two basic research strategies can be identified, ie. interindividual versus intraindividual approaches. The interindividual approach involves comparing and contrasting two or more types. The approach can be used to compare subjects or groups. To give an example, a commonly used research design entails comparing leaders and nonleaders seeking differences between them in characteristics. The procedure calls for:

- a. the identification of a group with leaders and followers;
- b. the measurement of all group members on some traits, and
- c. the testing of differences in characteristics between leaders and followers.

The intraindividual strategy on the other hand involves ascertaining the personal and situational factors which are related to performance of leaders. It aims to identify strengths and weaknesses of leaders as well as the pressures and influences in their environment which add or detract from their performance. The approach can be used to examine either single subjects or groups.

If the single case is considered, an intraindividual approach to leadership involves determining the positive and negative characteristics of each leader and then gauging how these impact on his performance. The influence of situational factors would also be examined. For example, it might be found that a leader's performance is diminished by his tendency to be indecisive when placed in stressful situations. This weak point could erode the positive effects of attributes such as intelligence, dedication and integrity.

### Failings

To date the interindividual strategy has been that one most commonly used in leadership research. (eg see Cattell and Stice (1954); Ghiselli (1971)). It is not without its failings. They include the following:

- a. It might explain differences between individuals (eg between leaders and non leaders) but fail to indicate intraindividual differences (ie differences within leaders).
- b. It might show quantitative differences between one type of person (eg leaders) compared with another type (eg non leaders) but might not show qualitative differences.

### Intraindividual Differences

On the first failing, the interindividual approach may reveal the common differences between individuals. For example, one possible way in which leaders might differ from non leaders is that the former have a higher level of initiative than the latter. But what the approach fails to reveal is:

- a. What effect the differences in levels of initiative between leaders have on their performance. Leaders might vary in effectiveness as a function of their initiative, ie the higher the leader's initiative, the better his performance. Similarly, there might be a point above which initiative has no further effect on a leader's performance.
- b. What effect this characteristic has on each leader's performance when considered together with other attributes. A person might fail as a leader simply because he lacks initiative. Alternatively, he might have a very high level of initiative but still fail as a leader because he has deficiencies in other areas of his personality such as being impulsive and unstable in his behaviour.

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These examples are provided to demonstrate the point that the traditional interindividual strategy can sometimes lack discriminatory power. Both leaders and nonleaders might vary in their initiative for different reasons. If both groups have individuals who are high and low in this attribute, the use of the interindividual strategy would support a finding that the trait of initiative does not distinguish between leaders and nonleaders. This conclusion would suggest that initiative is of little importance in leadership. This is not necessarily true. If an intraindividual strategy is used it might demonstrate that initiative in conjunction with other personal attributes like drive, intelligence and self confidence play an important role in contributing to the individual's effectiveness as a leader.

As pointed out above by examining a leader's strengths and weaknesses it is possible to ascertain what factors are instrumental in his performance. If this process were to be repeated over a number of individuals who lead in a variety of situations, it might then become clear which leadership traits play a dominant role in the leader's performance.

In a similar vein, Sidman (1960) has advanced a number of arguments that single subject research is preferable to group research. One argument he presented was that research with a group of subjects may hide the true effectiveness of an experimental treatment. If a between group research design is used, the investigator might be satisfied at producing a reliable difference between the group means in his experiment. What the investigator does not know is how the manipulation affected each subject. If a single subject approach is used, it would be possible to ascertain the reasons for the manipulation having little effect on those subjects who score poorly on the dependant measures. The approach advocated by Sidman suggests that an intraindividual research design would be ideal for determining the effects experimental manipulations have on subjects.

#### Quantitative versus Qualitative Differences

Turning to the second failing of the interindividual strategy, i.e. quantitative versus qualitative differences, the author is currently studying the issue of military competence (Graco, in preparation). The basic aim of the investigation is to determine the characteristics of competent commanders by studying a sample of prominent World War One and World War Two commanders. Examples include Patton, Montgomery, Manstein and Eisenhower.

One result which has emerged from the study is that all subjects reviewed had a high level of what I call "professionalism". This, of course, begs the question of defining the term professionalism. Various authorities have different conceptions of this term.

One interpretation is that it emphasizes membership of a profession or a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive academic preparation. A second is that it refers to the proficiency with which responsibilities are discharged. A third is that it stresses the work and study required by the individual to broaden his outlook, improve his knowledge and skills, and keep up-to-date with developments in his field of employment.

In my view the term refers to the degree to which the individual makes himself more proficient, adept or expert in his calling i.e., strives for professional excellence. It is this meaning which best describes the professionalism of officers examined in my study of military competence. My subjects were officers who were deeply devoted to their profession and were students of warfare. As a group, they never ceased trying to improve their knowledge and skills and seeking mastery of their subject.

For the purposes of the paper, one implication is evident. If my subjects were administered a questionnaire designed to measure their professionalism, it would be expected that they would all score at the higher end of the scale



thus indicating possession of a high level of this attribute. Therefore one could draw the conclusion that one reason why these officers were competent was because they were "professional". This conclusion is based on a quantitative assessment which fails to reveal qualitative aspects more relevant to his performance as a commander.

Another conclusion drawn from the study of military competence was that though some commanders were highly professional, it was this characteristic which in some ways contributed to their failings in their performance as commanders. To take the example of Marshall Foch (Marshall Cornwall, 1972), one of the outstanding commanders of World War One. Prior to the war, Foch along with many of his contemporaries, spent many years both at work and in his own time, studying the reasons for the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. Based on the results of his analysis, he attributed the French failure to lack of the "Napoleonic offensive spirit". Foch failed to learn the lessons of the American Civil War and Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. Had he done this it could be argued that some of the tragic results of World War One might have been avoided.

Foch, who was responsible for teaching tactics at the French Staff College, imbued his students with the importance of the "offensive spirit". Many of these students were to hold key command appointments in the French Army in World War One. Consequently, many French soldiers in the early part of the war were to lose their lives while trying to break through German barbed wire and machine gun fire.

The example of Foch is in contrast to other competent commanders such as Allenby, Montgomery and Mountbatten whose professionalism contributed to their effectiveness as commanders. It illustrates that qualitative as well quantitative reasons are important in ascertaining why people are effective or ineffective leaders.

#### Idiographic Approach

From a broader point of view, the intraindividual strategy advocated in this paper has overtones of what Allport (1962) calls the "idiographic" or what he later called "morphogenic" perspective. Perhaps the strongest advocate of the idiographic perspective is Henry A. Murray (1963) who developed his "personological" approach. What he basically advocated is the "case study" method or "clinical study" in preference to "survey" and "experimental" techniques. The points raised above stress that the case study method is an important technique for enriching our understanding of the personality aspects of leadership - especially when intraindividual research strategies are used.

#### SITUATIONALLY DETERMINED MEASUREMENTS

It has been sometimes argued that situationally determined leadership measurement offers a means to demonstrate more clearly the significance of personality variables in effective leadership. For example Korman (1974, P191-193) stressed that in terms of contingency approaches to leadership research, personality constructs will have to be related more specifically to work behaviour and better measurement is required.

Citing Ghiselli's work (1971) as an example, Korman considered that if personality constructs are more situationally defined (ie made organizationally and work relevant) and that if they are carefully validated as Ghiselli did his, the role of personality constructs in contingency approaches will be better demonstrated. Korman also considered this approach would overcome the low test - retest reliabilities which have afflicted personality measurement (see Mischel, 1968) to date. Though his comments are pertinent to contingency approaches, they apply to leadership traits regardless of the context in which they are used.

Campbell (1977, P232) also drew attention to this problem when discussing the measurement of leadership ability. He stated that there are stable individual differences in leadership skill and these differences could be measured if we tried harder. He considered that trait measures used to date were not developed to be measures of leadership ability. By and large, they were borrowed from the general personality literature. He called for greater attention to be paid to defining, describing and measuring leadership phenomena.

### Criterion Sampling

One way of developing leadership measurements which are situationally determined is to use criterion sampling. This entails observing a sample of the leaders one wants to study and deducing why they perform the way they do - ie their performance is broken down into its components. These components are then used to develop measurement scales.

### Deductive vs Inductive Approach

Melcher (1977) stated that when using the deductive approach, the researcher observes the behaviour of leaders, deduces the different ways in which the leaders influence and are influenced by others, identifies and defines these dimensions of behaviour, refines them and then uses them to evaluate their explanatory - predictive power.

This contrasts with the inductive approach where the researcher either chooses or develops a set of behavioural dimensions he considers to be relevant to the study. This approach, though it has the appearance of objectivity and rigour, can produce results which are misleading. It could be found that some variables might correlate with the leadership assessed but are insignificant compared to those not included in the original list of measurements.

### Criterion Groups

A second way is to use criterion groups. Ghiselli (1971, P34) developed a set of trait measures consisting of paired adjectives, that were similar in social desirability, by using criterion groups. For each trait, two criterion groups were selected, one consisting of individuals standing high in the trait under consideration (eg supervisory ability) and the other individuals standing low in it. The items included in the scale for that trait were those for which the responses of the two groups were significantly different. That is, an item was taken to be part of a scale if the "high" criterion group chose one adjective in it with greater relative frequency and the "low" criterion group chose the other. Items were assigned weights which were proportional to the magnitude of the differences between the two groups.

### Validity of Measurements and Manipulations

Campbell also argued that many lines of evidence are required when establishing the construct validity of measuring instruments and experimental manipulations. He considered that a greater effort should be directed towards determining if measuring instruments gauge what they purport to measure and that experimental manipulations work the way they were intended.

### Debriefs

One way of checking the effectiveness of experimental manipulations is to do as both Sidman (1960) and Campbell (P230) suggest, ie debrief subjects after experiments to determine how they interpreted the treatment. This information could explain the success or failure of experimental manipulations.

This is an elementary step but as Campbell stated (P230) it is seldom taken.

An allied step is to conduct post assessment interviews. These could reveal sources of error and distortion in the measurement of subjects' personality and performance. Some could perform poorly and hence obtain low assessments because of ill health or domestic problems.

#### Multiple Criteria

A third step is to use multiple criteria when validating a measurement scale. Ghiselli (P35-36) used three criteria to determine if a trait is a part of managerial talent. These criteria were:

- a. It should differentiate between managers and non managers
- b. It should discriminate between successful and non successful managers
- c. It should correlate with success for managers to a higher degree than it should for non managers

The use of criteria such as these would help ensure that personality constructs used in leadership research are valid.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERSONALITY VARIABLES AND LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOURS

It has been suggested (eg Korman, 1977, P157) that people with certain traits are more likely to engage in certain desirable leadership behaviours than those without these characteristics. Similarly it has been suggested that people with certain personality traits are more likely to be accepted as leaders, even though their behaviour does not differ from those who do not have these traits. These propositions indicate some of the possible relationships that might exist between leadership traits and leadership behaviours. This is an important issue. Some reasons advanced for this include firstly the assumption by some people (for example, Howell, 1976, P78; Wexley and Yuke, 1977 P145) that it is what a leader does not what he is that counts. That is, leadership traits are not important compared to leadership behaviours. This assumption is questionable because it is still not clear what the exact relationships between leadership traits and leadership behaviours are. (In this discussion behaviour is used in the generic sense to cover styles, functions and other leadership actions such as for example, the "consideration" and "initiating structuring" dimensions of the Ohio State University Leadership Scales (see Stogdill, 1974, chs 12 and 37)). Secondly, the research carried out to ascertain the personality characteristics of leaders who use a consistent style of leadership, for example task - motivated leaders compared with relationship - motivated leaders, has been sparse, and alternatively, little research has been carried out to determine the leadership behaviours a person with specific personality traits is likely to employ.

It would be expected that if a leader was found to have a high score on a personality scale measuring assertiveness, he would also be assertive in his behaviours. However, the limitations of personality measurements of this nature are that they tell us little about the leadership behaviours leaders use to direct others.

In leadership research, the general trend has been to identify the personality characteristics of leaders and to isolate the behaviours they use to influence others. Few attempts have been made to link the two sets of variables.

Fiedler's LPC Scale (Fiedler, 1967) is one exception to this observation. Rice (1978) in reviewing research on the construct validity of this scale

summarized studies which indicated how high and low LPC persons see and are seen by others. For example, low LPC persons tend to evaluate more favourably their most preferred co-worker where as high LPC persons tended to evaluate more highly their least preferred co-worker. Another example is that low LPC persons were generally described by themselves and others as task oriented behaviourally while high LPC persons were described by themselves and others as relationship oriented in their behaviour.

It is not suggested that the LPC scale is a personality measurement per se (Rice suggests that it is a value-attitude scale) but it does demonstrate an attempt to link psychological measurement with behaviours - both covert (eg perceptions and cognitions) and overt (eg physical behaviours).

#### What is required

What is required in the leadership personality area is more research to establish the nexus between these two sets of variables. As explained, this task needs to be approached from two directions. The first is from the behavioural perspective with the aim being to establish the personality characteristics of leaders who employ consistently a particular style of leadership. The second is from the personality perspective with the aim of isolating those leadership behaviours used by people who have specific personality characteristics, for example, leadership styles employed by people who are highly intelligent compared with those who are of average intelligence.

Personality perspective includes perceptual and cognitive styles. We need to learn more about the way leaders perceive and react to events in their environment. Wynne and Hunsaker (1975) have attempted to link certain information processing styles with leadership behaviour. In their model they suggest that the actions of leaders and members are mediated by their cognitive styles in the context of their environment and the goals they are trying to achieve. The authors, quoting from Graen et al (1972, P235), stressed that the outcome might not lie with what the leader does but with the way it is interpreted by members and, one should add, how the leader evaluates members' responses.

#### Research Proposal

These then are the broad research requirements of this issue. In terms of research planned in Australia a project has been designed to investigate one aspect of the link between personality and behaviour at the Officer Cadet School (OCS) Portsea, Victoria. OCS is responsible for training potential officers to be subalterns in the Australian Regular Army.

#### Cognitive Complexity

The aim of the proposed research is to examine the relationship between cognitive complexity and leadership style flexibility. It was previously suggested (Graco, 1978) that cognitive complexity is associated with the ability to cope with ambiguous, ill structured and dynamic situations such as those encountered in management. Cognitively complex people cope better with stress and failure, are better able to see alternative points of view and use more complex decision making strategies. It was also argued that cognitively complex leaders appear to cope better than cognitively simplex leaders with situations requiring the ability to discriminate between task and interpersonal aspects of leadership and the ability to respond differentially to these different requirements. This equated with the view that Fiedler's high LPC leaders (Fiedler 1967) are cognitive complex while low LPC leaders are cognitive simplex and hence high LPC leaders cope better than low LPC leaders with moderately favourable situations. (I should add that Rice (1978) has presented evidence disputing the cognitive complexity interpretation of the LPC scale).

#### LPC Scale

Fiedler regards people with a low LPC score as task-motivated while he

summarized studies which indicated how high and low LPC persons see and are seen by others. For example, low LPC persons tend to evaluate more favourably their most preferred co-worker where as high LPC persons tended to evaluate more highly their least preferred co-worker. Another example is that low LPC persons were generally described by themselves and others as task oriented behaviourally while high LPC persons were described by themselves and others as relationship oriented in their behaviour.

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#### LPC Scale

Fiedler regards people with a low LPC score as task-motivated while he

regards people with a high LPC as a relationship-motivated. He does not explain what type of leader a person with a middle LPC score may be. Schou and Biersner (1977) found in a study of leadership behaviour flexibility that perceived flexibility was not related to leadership style as measured by the LPC instrument. However they did find that very few respondents had low LPC scores, more than a third of the respondents had high LPC scores, while nearly two-thirds were in the interval between high and low LPC scores. The authors offered the possible explanation that the respondents are not solely task or relationship-motivated, but rather choose a style appropriate to the demands of the situation. This interpretation was supported by the large proportion of respondents with high style flexibility found in the middle LPC group. They suggest that Fiedler's theory is inadequate since it accounts for only two styles of leadership.

The approach described should add to our understanding of the link between personality (in this instance cognitive complexity) and leadership behaviour.

#### SUMMARY

A number of issues have been raised in this paper on personality characteristics. The key points emphasized in the discussion are listed below:

- a. That an intraindividual research strategy appears to be a far more promising way of determining the role leadership traits play in the leadership equation.
- b. That the case study method is an important technique for enriching our understanding of personality aspects of leadership - especially when intraindividual research strategies are used.
- c. That personality measurements need to be more situationally defined and measured.
- d. That far greater attention needs to be paid to describing, defining and measuring leadership phenomena.
- e. That the relationships between personality variables and leadership behaviours needs to be more clearly established.

#### Conclusion

The points raised in this paper and a previous one written by the author (Graco, 1978) suggest that leadership personality characteristics are alive and well, and that those (eg Chemers and Rice, 1974, P92) who have dismissed this area of research as an unprofitable exercise have been premature in their action. It has been shown in this paper that the problems encountered so far might not lie with leadership traits per se but with our measuring techniques and our research strategies.

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